

EDITORIAL

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AARP missed its chance to improve drug law

AARP's intentions may be good but its timing is rotten.

Last week, the powerful group that represents senior citizens said it would urge changes in the prescription drug bill passed by **Congress** last November. **AARP** wants the government to have the authority to negotiate lower drug prices for Medicare: The new law, which becomes effective in 2006, specifically forbids the government from bargaining over Medicare drug costs. **AARP** also wants to allow drugs to be re-imported from Canada, which also is forbidden in the law.

The prescription drug bill never would have passed were it not for the **AARP's** endorsement. The organization's insistence that its 35 million members supported a Medicare drug bill was credited with pushing some fence-sitting lawmakers to vote for the bill.

The public furor over the bill slopped over onto **AARP**, which had an estimated 45,000 membership cancellations out of protest.

The question now is how much success **AARP** will have on amending an existing law. Surely its lobbyists and leaders know that they had more bargaining power on the legislation last fall when the legislation was fluid than they do now that the bill has been passed and signed into law.

Convincing members of **Congress** to make these changes in the law will be infinitely tougher this time around: Instead of lobbying with the drug industry for passage of the bill, **AARP** will be lobbying against the drug industry, which insists that Medicare not have the power to negotiate on drug prices.

AARP has a long history of working in the best interest of senior citizens. Over the last few years, however, its pursuit of business

interests and its selling of insurance and other products have muddied the waters on **AARP**'s mission.

AARP's endorsement of this particular prescription drug bill was a huge disappointment. If it dedicates its clout to changing the most onerous parts of the drug law, **AARP** could resuscitate its reputation.

If it is content, on the other hand, to just issuing a press release without pushing for real change, then **AARP**'s image as a force for good will be permanently tarnished.